

Volunteers are increasingly important as budget decline

by Bill Kent



Volunteers Dana Hornyak and Mari Rice. USFWS/Candace Ward

Last week Kenai Peninsula public radio stations conducted their spring membership drive. While listener membership and support is vital to these stations, without volunteers contributing their time, there would be no public radio station beaming non-commercial programming to Kenai Peninsula communities. I took some vacation time last week to volunteer for the drive, and operated the control board for a few hours and answered phones each day over the four-day drive at the station in Kenai. I am also a volunteer host of a music program once or twice a month, and usually participate in the semi-annual clean up of a stretch of the Spur Highway that the station has adopted. While it is probably not obvious at first glance, I believe there are many similarities in the operations of that radio station and Kenai National Wildlife Refuge.

For the most part, our Refuge operating budget consists of appropriated funds authorized by Congress and the President. Funds from outside the legislative process, such as grants from non-government organizations like the National Wildlife Foundation, are infrequent and usually only provide matching funds or part of a project cost. In recent years, our basic operational expenses have risen substantially with fuel and utility costs, along with the cost of supplies, materials and equipment. Funds from Congress have decreased

significantly at the same time, so we are continually re-examining and modifying our priorities. As a result, we and other government agencies are increasingly relying on volunteers to help keep public lands and facilities operating, just as public radio stations are increasingly relying on volunteers for a variety of operations.

Refuge volunteers help in a wide variety of ways: conducting interpretive and environmental education programs, cleaning outhouses, assisting with biological projects, helping with cabin maintenance and construction, trail maintenance, and many, many more activities that keep Refuge programs and facilities operating.

Did you know, for example, that the hosts at Hidden Lake and Upper Skilak campgrounds are typically not Alaska residents, but are volunteers up from the Lower-48 for the summer? We have repeatedly tried to recruit Alaska residents for these campground host positions without success. Usually, Alaskans tell us they do not want to be “tied down” for the entire summer, and are willing to volunteer only for a few weeks. That is understandable—taking full advantage of Alaska summers offers is addictive. However, if fuel costs continue to rise, I am not sure that we will continue to have Lower-48 volunteers willing to make the long journey to the Kenai Peninsula to host at our campgrounds. If that happens, we may have to re-evaluate and possibly change our current policy on campground hosts.

The Kenai Refuge is not the only facility which has tried to increase its volunteer numbers in recent years. The National Park Service, U.S. Forest Service, and Alaska State Parks have all attempted to recruit additional volunteers as budgets decrease and visitor demands increase. We are hoping that the large number of “baby boomers” nearing retirement will provide a new and invigorated pool of volunteers in the near future. After all, volunteering is a great way to make a worthwhile contribution and meet interesting people in the process.

Bill Kent has been the Supervisory Park Ranger at Kenai Refuge since April, 1991. Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the Web at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/>.